

R 311806Z OCT 07
FM AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6907
INFO ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
MAGHREB COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS NOUAKCHOTT 000912

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN MAURITANIA'S
SECOND CITY

¶1. (U) Summary: Mission personnel have made several trips in September and October to Mauritania's second city of Nouadhibou. The city offers unique opportunities and challenges for U.S. engagement as both the center of economic activity in Mauritania and as the cross-roads for drugs and alien smuggling. End Summary

¶2. (U) Second City: Nouadhibou, capital of the Dakhlat Nouadhibou province, is Mauritania's second city with a population of some 150,000. About 60,000 residents are involved in fishing either as artisanal fishermen, crew members for commercial vessels, or in fish processing activities. The Port of Nouadhibou transfers 12 million tons of iron ore from mines 300 miles away in Zouerate -- the rail line to the mine supports what are billed the longest trains in the world. The national mining company, SNIM, is one of the most important employers in the region and is key to support of many social services. Nouadhibou figures importantly in Mission activities. In the past month the U.S. Coast Guard trained naval and fishery officials on boarding and inspection techniques, the Embassy inaugurated a DOD-funded clinic and USAID-funded water project, and public diplomacy began preparations for a November cultural event. Also in November, the Mission will begin a DOD-supported mine awareness campaign for towns along the border with Western Sahara.

¶3. (U) Economy: The provincial governor or "wali," Abdi Ould Horma, has ambitious plans for his province -- telling EmbOffs he wanted to make Nouadhibou the "Dubai of Africa" as a major transshipment hub. While somewhat over ambitious, the wali told Charge the Government would include a development program for Nouadhibou in its Paris Club Consultative Group meeting in Paris December 4-6. The proposal will call for expansion of the ore-handling pier, expansion of the container terminal and expansion of fish processing facilities. The wali noted that the completion of the highway to Nouakchott two years ago had significantly increased truck traffic through the border post with Morocco with products moving daily between Morocco and West Africa -- previously, the current 4 hour trip had to be done over two or more days driving on the beach to the capital. Substantial new Chinese orders for iron ore will open new ore fields and increase annual exports -- although these orders have also challenged SNIM to find the cash needed to expand production and export capacity. The port currently does not meet demand for pier space. An EC proposal to remove the multiple scuttled vessels that litter the harbor is expected to increase traffic.

¶4. (U) Fishing: The fishing industry has the greatest employment impact on Nouadhibou. European, Korean and Chinese fishing vessels ply the rich resources off the coast. A 2006 EU fishing agreement with Mauritania provides for over 110 million Euros annually in economic support and license fees. The Director of the National Oceanography and Fisheries Institute in Nouadhibou told Charge that "we recognize that fish are our one renewable resource. If we manage it well, it will last forever; however, if we are not careful, everything could be lost in a few years and take decades to rebuild." He noted some concern over Chinese fishing vessels -- the Chinese have 60 - 70 fishing vessels

operating in and about the port -- since they employ drag net techniques that can destroy the habitat. The EU has been working with Nouadhibou fish processing plants to improve phyto-sanitary standards to allow for increases exports to Europe of fish not caught by the European fleet (that operates and processes off-shore). The EU has reported improvements which would also assist Mauritania to explore AGOA export options to the U.S.

15. (U) Boat People: Government officials highlight the difficulty in responding to a growing movement of West African migrants trying to reach Spain's Canary Islands in open pirogues launching from beaches near Nouadhibou or smuggled in fishing boats. On October 26, a Spanish fishing boat discovered the sole survivor of one such pirogue that had left from near Nouadhibou on October 3. The boat ran out of fuel a day out of port (reportedly because the crew had been swindled when they discovered their jerry-cans of fuel were filled instead with water). Adrift for over a month, the passengers set upon each other reportedly throwing the weakest overboard. While Spanish authorities -- who station two patrol boats and a surveillance helicopter in Nouadhibou -- report that the migrant flow is down, the numbers are still in the hundreds each month. The wali told Emboffs the government had limited legal standing to prevent attempted boat crossings by the largely West African would-be migrants. Freedom-of-movement agreements between Mauritania and most ECOWAS countries allows non-Mauritanians to stay in Nouadhibou while they look for a boat. He said, "only if we find a van load of people at 3 o'clock in the morning with an outboard motor in the back seat, can we arrest anyone."

Mayor Mohamed Fdel Ould Abu Bekrim told Emb Offs the migrants had also brought the problems one would expect with such a desperate population -- stress on the city's sparse services, criminality, and prostitution with the corresponding spread of AIDS.

16. (U) Drugs: In addition to alien smuggling, drugs also pass through Nouadhibou. In the spring, a small plane making an emergency landing in Nouadhibou was discovered to be carrying over 500 kilos of cocaine. Last week, police seized over 5000 kilos of hashish in two trucks using a smuggling route into Morocco. The wali noted that the border is thinly patrolled and that the "no man's land" on the opposite side of the border (a strip nominally administered by the UN MINURSO mission in Western Sahara) is a wild area locally referred to as "Khandahar." The mayor told PAO the drug trade made him particularly concerned about the well-being of Nouadhibou's many unemployed youth and sought U.S. assistance to support youth centers and income generation schemes.

HANKINS